Power and Gender
in John Webster's Tragedies

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Letters

and the Institute of Economics and Social Sciences

of Bilkent University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts in

English Language and Literature

by

Meltem Kiran

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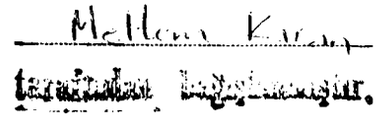

We certify that we have read this thesis and that in our combined opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

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A b s t r a c t

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Meltem Kiran
M.A. in English Literature
Advisor: Dr. Laurence A. Raw
January 1991

John Webster's tragedies The White Devil (1612) and The Duchess of Malfi (1612-13) primarily deal with the spread of corruption in society through the power-politics of the rulers. Every character, regardless of his/her social class, contributes to corruption wittingly or unwittingly, and is destroyed in the end regardless of the motivations -- whether morally good or evil -- on which he/she chooses to act. This dissertation analyses the ways in which the characters are affected by social corruption, but also suggests certain alternatives which may point towards change within the existing social system. In both plays, there are some characters who, by their enlightened view of the workings of corruption, can present a threat to this system. Especially women, who are determined to assert themselves despite the oppressive influence of their patriarchal society, can form potentially subversive alternatives. Webster analyses this through Vittoria in The White Devil and the Duchess in The Duchess of Malfi. This dissertation asserts that Webster proves himself to be a radical dramatist by subtly emphasising the subversive potential of women in society.

Ö z e t

John Webster'ın Trajedilerinde Güç ve Cinsiyet

Meltem Kıran
İngiliz Edebiyatı Yüksek Lisans
Tez Yöneticisi: Dr. Laurence A. Raw
Ocak 1991

I. James dönemi oyun yazarlarından John Webster'ın Beyaz Şeytan (1612) ve Malfi Düşesi (1612-13) adlı trajedileri, yöneticilerin izledikleri güç politikalarında kendini gösteren yozlaşmanın bütün topluma yayılma sürecini konu edinir. İki oyunun da can alıcı noktalarından biri her bireyin ister bilinçli ister bilinçsiz olarak toplumsal yozlaşmaya katkıda bulunmasıdır. Bireyin ahlaki açıdan iyi ya da kötü bir amaca hizmet etmesi veya amacı doğrultusunda bir süre başarılı adımlar atması ona son bağlamda pek bir şey kazandırmaz; kendisinin de bir şekilde sürekliliğini sağladığı yozlaşma kimsenin denetleyemeyeceği boyutlara ulaşacak ve bireyin yıkımına neden olacaktır. Bu araştırma toplumsal yozlaşmanın Webster'ın kişileri üzerindeki etkilerini incelemekle beraber, varolan toplumsal düzenin değişimine yol açabilecek alternatifleri de tartışmaktadır. Bu alternatifleri yaratan yine bireyin kendisidir; her iki oyunda da yozlaşma sürecini diğerlerinden daha somut olrak gören bazı karakterler bu sürecin işlerliğini tehdit edebilmektedirler. Bu açıdan bakıldığında, ataerkil toplumun yaptırımlarına boyun eğmeye zorlanan kadın karakterler kendilerine özgü tepkileriyle oyunlarda özel bir konum kazanırlar. Webster kadınların varolan toplumsal düzene getirebilecekleri önemli alternatifleri Beyaz Şeytan'da Vittoria'nın ve Malfi Düşesi'nde Düşes'in kişilikleri aracılığıyla

vurgulamıştır. Araştırmamızın temel savlarından biri de Webster'ın ataerkil bir toplumdan yetişmiş olmasına rağmen, özellikle kadınların toplumdaki gizilgücünü başarıyla yansıtmış olması açısından çağının ilerisinde bir sanatçı olduğudur.

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Chapter I

Introduction

John Webster's The White Devil (1612) and The Duchess of Malfi (1612-13) primarily deal with a corrupt society, and the power-struggles among its rulers, which finally destroy everybody involved in them. The plays present a grim outlook on life, and this has frequently attracted unfavourable criticism. According to T.S. Eliot, Webster is "a very great literary and dramatic genius directed towards chaos." [1] It has also been claimed that because of this chaotic state of mind, the dramatist cannot hold the structure together in his plays. T.B. Tomlinson argues that only "in the very act of writing [The Duchess of Malfi]," does Webster realise "that the chaos he senses in the universe about him has almost destroyed the play itself," and hence shows "a crude moral awakening, a pulling together of the play by a massive concentration in the later acts." [2]

The overwhelming implication of these statements is that Webster has failed to give the plays a moral framework to which the academic critic -- and the audience -- may refer so that they may account for "the human waste" [3] exhibited in them. However, Webster seems to have deliberately avoided a moral framework, and designated his characterisation and plot-structure accordingly. As David Farley-Hills explains, "it is the struggle of the individual within this system that principally concerns him as a dramatist." [4] To be more precise, Webster aims at analysing the ways in which an individual may choose to act within a socially corrupt system, the ideological

premises of which are shaped by power-struggles devoid of any moralistic consideration.

The individual is not likely to achieve anything substantial because, hostile to any radical change any member of the society may effect, the power-structure adopts certain strategies by which the individual's actions are made to assume a predictable course. Webster pursues this process by creating certain rituals of behaviour which the characters are designated to follow throughout the plays. By means of these rituals, corruption is nurtured; and this dictates the actions of the individual. If anyone chooses to resist, he/she is prevented by violence. These plays appeal particularly to the modern audience, to whom such processes (as relentlessly implemented by Hitler, for example) are very familiar. To quote David Farley-Hills:

> This world may be merely shadow in the light of eternity, but it seems solid enough while we are here -- nor is Webster willing to labour the point that this is so much the worse for us. [5]

Far from appearing incoherent, the plot-structure emphasises the effect of social corruption on the individual. Moral considerations do not assume importance (and hence divert the audience's attention) at the expense of the central issue. Not one reliable moral criterion exists by which we can judge the characters. The impetus of the plays does not arise from a moral conflict which the individual encounters; rather social and/or ideological issues determine the course of his/her actions -- whether the individual is aware of this or not.

A brief examination of the plays will help to clarify these

points. The plots move swiftly forward in a series of major confrontations, the outcome of which is foreshadowed in the first act. To begin with The White Devil, Count Lodovico's hostile opinion of the Duke of Brachiano in the first scene foreshadows a political conflict which will consist of the power-struggles between Brachiano, and the Duke of Florence and Cardinal Monticelso. The second scene of The Duchess of Malfi not only establishes the conflict between the Duchess and her brothers, but gives a foretaste of the dénouement. "The marriage night / Is the entrance to some prison" (I.ii.246-47)[6] says the Cardinal, while warning the Duchess against any plan of re-marriage she may devise. Again the basis of this conflict is ideological; the brothers want to exploit the Duchess's social privileges at all costs.

These confrontations exist alongside others which can be regarded as variations on the notion of social corruption based on the struggle for power. Francisco's tricking Lodovico into pursuing revenge for Isabella's murder (The White Devil IV.iii) or the Cardinal's murder of his mistress Julia with a cold-blooded plot (The Duchess of Malfi V.ii) are only two examples which emphasise this.

The extent to which corruption has affected society is revealed best in the confrontations which involve those who try to act according to their moral principles. In The White Devil, Cornelia and Isabella attempt to fulfil their duties as mother and wife, with the result that Cornelia loses her sanity and Isabella suffers death at the hands of her husband. The Duchess of Malfi is subjected to cruel torture by her brothers who feel justified in regarding her as a whore

because of her marriage. The conclusions J.W. Lever draws from the relationship of moral issues to the power-struggles in The White Devil are relevant here:

> Virtue is allowed, and even encouraged, to speak out; but it has no field of action .... [T]he suffocating ambience of power and oppression is insisted on as the atmosphere in which all characters move and have their being .... Guilty and innocent alike are the victims of power: it is in the light of this truth that the moral ambivalences are resolved.[7]

This argument could well apply to The Duchess of Malfi; but Lever asserts that in this play "human dignity is affirmed, not only in precept, but in character and action."[8] He believes that "To her [the Duchess's] love of Antonio is added affectionate care for her children, and a deepening religious faith,"[9] which culminates in "an affirmation of reason and an assertion of the Stoic kingship of the mind, undismayed by tyranny"[10] in her last moments. But there is no sense of "human dignity" in The Duchess of Malfi; all characters including the Duchess behave neither heroically nor tragically in Webster's corrupt world. Whilst bidding farewell to Antonio, she says:

> And yet, O Heaven, thy heavy hand is in't,
> I have seen my little boy oft scourge his top,
> And compar'd myself to't; nought made me e'er go
> right,
> But Heaven's scourge-stick. (III.v.75-78)

These lines might emphasise Lever's point, but unfortunately there is no evidence from the action to justify her words. On the contrary, she has already used religion for her own self-interest by arranging for a feigned pilgrimage in pursuit of her husband (III.ii). In discussing The White Devil, George Holland observes that "individual choices of good and evil are still valid" in a corrupt society, but "as the atmosphere becomes more and more corrupt these choices are increasingly difficult to make or to understand." [11] Although the Duchess's decision to marry Antonio can be regarded as morally justifiable, she fails to see that, by choosing to go on her pilgrimage, she is employing the same strategy as the Cardinal in promoting his political power. So when the Duchess addresses herself once more to Providence as she is about to die (IV.ii.231-34), it becomes difficult to decide on the extent to which she has understood the implications of her actions, and achieved tragic "dignity."

The Duchess's vicissitudes suggest that there is "a strong causal relationship between personal action and social atmosphere," [12] causing every individual to contribute to corruption -- both wittingly and unwittingly. As the plays unequivocally establish this point, any moral consideration is rendered unimportant. Thus the focus of interest is on the conflict between the individual and society, which is made more ironic by our knowledge that the individual is responsible for the social norms which finally destroy him/her.

Interestingly enough, those who give the potentially most subversive responses to this corrupt social system turn out to be women -- despite the fact that they are categorised as the inferior

sex. Isabella's words "O that I were a man" (The White Devil II.i.242) point to a bitter awareness of the frustration females encounter in a male-dominated world. Vittoria feels the need to "personate masculine virtue" (III.ii.135); but unlike Isabella she refuses "to hold my life / At yours or any man's entreaty ..." (137-8). Nor does the Duchess intend to retreat: like men who "in some great battles / By apprehending danger, have achiev'd / Almost impossible actions," (The Duchess of Malfi I.ii.266-68) she runs the risk of marriage. In spite of the dominant influence of the patriarchal society which reveals itself in female discourse, Vittoria and the Duchess challenge male autonomy by insisting on acting upon their free will. Since this would adversely affect the power-politics which the rulers sustain to stimulate social corruption, these women are finally dispensed with through violent means. In a sense, the plays demonstrate the strategies used by a patriarchal society to subdue females; therefore, a study of power-gender relationship in these plays becomes essential to this dissertation.

The first chapter of this dissertation dwells upon the process of social corruption and those rituals of behaviour, which have been instigated by the rulers and spread to society as a whole. The second chapter discusses the influence of corruption on the individual, and the ways in which that individual chooses to exercise his/her own will within the given social system. The last chapter describes the power-gender relationship in Webster's patriarchal societies, with an analysis of the nature and significance of the female struggle, fundamental to the plays.

This dissertation aims to prove that The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi have a radical outlook on the relationship of the individual to his/her society. Webster creates a disturbing sense of reality, forcing the audience to cast aside any moral judgements. It appears that none of the characters is able to achieve anything substantial or initiate any change (despite their efforts) in a corrupt society which shows no sign of progress. Yet Webster's interest in the potentially subversive role of women emphasises his conviction that change -- however slow -- may be effected even in such despotic societies. Jonathan Dollimore observes that "in Jacobean drama we find not a triumphant emancipation of women but at best an indication of the extent of their oppression."[13] Webster takes us one step further; through the powerful personalities of his two female protagonists, he suggests that women can become an important alternative in initiating social change. This is yet another reason why The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi may appear radical today, when females are in search of a redefinition of their role within society.

Chapter II

Power and Society

In both The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, the bitterest conflicts arise from a desire on the part of the religious and secular rulers to attain and/or sustain power, which thus lends itself to the birth of corruption. In order to sustain their power, they employ a variety of strategies ranging from the abuse of justice to the exploitation of religious beliefs. Nevertheless, their subjects also partake of and contribute to the corrupt social system established by the rulers, whether or not the system harmonises with or conflicts with their own desires. Those ambitious of attaining power, such as economic well-being, readily serve the rulers. Those willing to act according to their own moral and religious convictions unwittingly support the rulers, who manipulate such convictions for their own benefit. In this way, the mechanism of corruption is set in motion, resulting in the destruction of not only those who oppose it, but even those who would willingly perpetuate it.

A. Power and Justice

Political power in Webster's Italianate societies is monopolised by the secular and religious rulers, whose authority is taken for granted by their subjects. However, the rulers do not employ their power for the general good; they act on personal interest all the time. This in turn leads to the violation of justice, and hence corruption within society.

These points are illustrated in III.ii of The White Devil,

where Vittoria has the charges of adultery and complicity in murder brought against her. In the preceding scene, Monticelso tells Francisco that they "have naught but circumstances / To charge her with," (III.i.4-5) which foreshadows the illegal course that the trial will assume. The arraignment starts with the Lawyer accusing Vittoria in Latin, to which she strongly objects. He then adopts an elevated rhetoric, which she cannot understand. This scene is comic in intention (as nobody understands what anyone else is saying), but has an underlying seriousness of purpose, as the Lawyer's inadequacies provide the justification for Monticelso assuming the roles of accuser and judge. Then follow Monticelso's accusations, the insubstantiality of which he tries to conceal beneath his elevated language: "I shall be plainer with you, and paint out / Your follies in more natural red and white / Than that upon your cheek" (III.ii.51-53). Combined with Vittoria's intelligent retorts, all becomes more confused. When Monticelso accuses her of being "cunning" (123) in her arguments, she answers brilliantly, putting right on her side:

> You shame your wit and judgement
> To call it so. What, is my just defence
> By him that is my judge call'd impudence?
> Let me appeal then from this Christian court
> To the uncivil Tartar. (124-28)

In spite of this, she is sent to the House of Convertites at Monticelso's bidding, even though he is unable to obtain any tangible evidence of her role in her husband's death. His judgement is

arbitrary; but no one can object to him. Only one Lieger Ambassador points out that "the cardinal's too bitter" (107). This lack of criticism has the apparent implication that, whilst everyone may not agree with the existing system of judgement, they condone it -- which encourages the rulers to continue in their accustomed ways. Vittoria understands this only too well, but to no avail:

VITTORIA: A rape, a rape!

MONTICELSO: How?

VITTORIA: Yes, you have ravish'd justice,

Forc'd her to do your pleasure. (273-74)

Even those who would wish to remain untainted by such corruption are inevitably affected by its evil influence. It is one of the ironies of both plays that such characters do not really understand how justice has been perverted by the rulers. Cornelia overhears her daughter's seduction by Brachiano (The White Devil I.ii), and rails at both of them; she upbraids Brachiano by reminding him of his moral obligations as a ruler:

The lives of princes should like dials move,

Whose regular example is so strong,

They make the times by them go right or wrong. (I.ii.285-87)

However, when faced with problems which require immediate intervention, she ignores what she already knows about Brachiano, in the hope of seeking redress. Whilst trying to learn from Marcello with whom he is going to fight, she invokes Brachiano's authority as an upstanding, morally correct ruler:

Will you dissemble? Sure you do not well

To fright me thus; you never look thus pale,
But when you are most angry. I do charge you
Upon my blessing - nay I'll call the Duke,
And he shall school you. (V.ii.5-8)

Evidently a sinful adulterer can pass as the respectable Duke should the need arise. By forgetting that the Duke's "example" is in fact totally corrupt, Cornelia deviates from her own moral principles, and unwittingly perpetuates corruption in her society.

B. Power and Religion

If justice has been irredeemably corrupted in Webster's societies, this same process can be witnessed in the field of religion. The irony between the theoretical representation of a religious institution and that represented in the plays is striking. The church building is no longer a place of spiritual worship; it functions as a setting for subtle intrigues. The Duchess plans to follow Antonio (who has fled to Ancona), by means of a feigned pilgrimage to a shrine close to Ancona indicating that her escape from the court " Will seem a princely progress" (The Duchess of Malfi III.ii.310). Her maid objects to this plan on moralistic grounds, but the Duchess does not heed her:

CARIOLA : In my opinion,
She were better progress to the baths at Lucca,
Or go visit the Spa
In Germany : for, if you will believe me,
I do not like this jesting with religion,

This feigned pilgrimage.

DUCHESS : Thou art a superstitious fool:

Prepare us instantly for our departure. (312-19)

The Cardinal has no such constraints either; he confronts his sister at the shrine of Our Lady of Loreto and uses his influence as a religious authority to bring about her banishment (III.iv). At the same time, two pilgrims comment on the illegality of this procedure, and by means of this short but effective scene, the viewpoints of the ruling classes and the people are contrasted. Two incompatible sets of values exist simultaneously within the same society, with one tending to dominate the other. Although the pilgrims are aware of the Cardinal's misapplication of justice, they have to remain passive, for fear of reprisals:

FIRST PILGRIM: But I would ask what power hath this

state

Of Ancona, to determine of a free prince?

SECOND PILGRIM: They are a free state sir, and her brother

show'd

How that the Pope, forehearing of her looseness,

Hath seiz'd into th'protection of the Church

The Dukedom which she held as dowager.

FIRST PILGRIM: But by what justice?

SECOND PILGRIM: Sure I think by none,

Only by her brother's instigation. (27-34)

No matter how much the religious potentates abuse their authority, they manage to remain immune from retribution. During the canonisation

of Cardinal Monticelso (The White Devil IV.iii), Francisco persuades him to excommunicate Brachiano and Vittoria who have fled to Padua. This is the first decree issued by the new Pope; it is clear that it is simply to satisfy his own desires, and not accompanied by any sense of duty. Jonathan Dollimore's observations as regards this scene are relevant here :

> It is an episode which shows how state power is rendered invulnerable by identification with its 'divine' origin -- how, in effect, policy gets an ideological sanction. In performance of course we will see that it is an appeal further ratified by the awesome apparatus of investiture -- a good instance of the ceremonial keeping of men in awe .... Thus at the same time as it consolidates faith, religious ritual is shown to consolidate the power of those who rule, the second being secured in and through the first.[1]

During Vittoria's arraignment, Cardinal Monticelso skillfully conceals his motives by employing a language full of religious allusions, in order to suggest that he has only the interests of God in mind. He emphasises Vittoria's sinful nature in his accusations:

> You see my lords what goodly fruit she seems,
> Yet like those apples travellers report
> To grow where Sodom and Gomorrah stood
> I will but touch her and you straight shall see
> She'll fall to soot and ashes. (III.ii.63-67)

Unable to support his accusations against Vittoria with tangible evidence, the Cardinal justifies his case by reference to the

Bible. "Too bitter" as he is towards her, his position in the Church however enables him to pursue this strategy successfully. After the arraignment, Flamineo tells two of the Lieger Ambassadors how they themselves have become victims of the Cardinal's cunning:

> O they have wrought their purpose cunningly, as if they would not seem to do it out of malice .... Religion; O how it is comeddled with policy. The first bloodshed in the world happened about religion. (III.iii.15-16, 38-40)

Flamineo's remark is to the point, but its significance is bound to be lost on the Ambassadors since they take it to be the nonsense of a brother who is distracted by his sister's punishment. Many times in the play, such truths are used for other ends, enhancing the irony of the situation to which they are applied. Religious allusions work best in this respect, for they arouse instant emotional response from the characters. In a later scene, Vittoria dismisses Flamineo with the following phrase: "I give that portion to thee, and no other / Which Cain groan'd under having slain his brother" (V.vi.12-13). Like Cain, Flamineo has committed fratricide, but this is of secondary importance in this context. What makes Vittoria's allusion all the more striking is although religion has not played a vital part in her life hitherto, she can now employ this image as a justification for her refusal to help her brother.

Religion is thus used for personal and political ends, and rendered ineffectual through a process of corruption brought about by this collaboration of the Church and State authorities. Cardinal Monticelso and Ferdinand establish such an alliance against Brachiano,

at first by trying to corner him in the notorious arraignment (III.ii). But Brachiano, a duke and a powerful man, refuses to submit to this strategy. When Monticelso accuses him of being lustful during the arraignment, Brachiano threatens to kill him. The derogatory language he uses indicates that he holds no respect for the religious authorities at all:

> Sirrah priest,
> I'll talk with you hereafter, - Do you hear?
> The sword you frame of such an excellent temper,
> I'll sheathe in your own bowels:
> There are a number of thy coat resemble
> Your common post-boys. (163-68)

In short, the Church and the State lend support to each other when common interest obliges them, but at other times they are ready to fight with one another. Ambitious to sustain and advance their power, both employ similar mischievous methods, concealing their real motivations behind a mask of decorum. Consequently, not one moral norm remains unviolated. Yet such scheming does not always pass without notice, as is evident from the several instances discussed above. Furthermore, the rulers often have to take overt action, or use violence, particularly when faced with an individual who represents a threat to their power.

C. The Exercise of Power

The employment of violence as an inevitable consequence of corruption is established in the opening scene of The White Devil. The

newly banished Count Lodovico claims that the laws which have been invoked to persecute him do not apply to those of "princely rank," (I.i.9) who can exercise their power without impunity. He holds the rulers responsible for his persecution. According to his friends (who know that he committed murders "Bloody and full of horror" (32)), this charge is not altogether unjust but Lodovico dismisses their argument with a curt remark: " 'Las they were flea-bitings: / Why took they not my head then?" (32-3). This would indicate that murder can be taken as inevitable in this society, especially when used to further the rulers' intentions. Now that he has been discarded by those authorities who once allowed him to commit his crimes, Lodovico decides to retaliate: "I'll make Italian cut-works in their guts / If ever I return" (51-52).

Lodovico's situation illustrates a pattern of violence evident in both plays. Such acts are by no means unfamiliar to the rulers. Brachiano decides to dispose of his wife and Vittoria's husband so that he can continue his affair with Vittoria more freely (The White Devil I.ii). The manner of Isabella's death explains much of his nature. His men murder her by poisoning his picture at her bedside. Brachiano witnesses the murder by a dumbshow, and far from being moved by his wife's fidelity, he is filled with delight: "Excellent, then she's dead-" (II.ii.24). The Cardinal, weary of his mistress Julia, kills her by a similar stratagem (The Duchess of Malfi V.ii). He first tells her that the Duchess and her two children have been strangled on his orders, and then makes her take an oath by kissing the Bible, which happens to be poisoned. There is apparently no moral

issue the rulers cannot abuse in their quest for power.

Secondly, the rulers employ agents to aid them in this quest, so that they themselves can avoid committing any crimes and hence keep the situation under control. The Cardinal and Ferdinand have Bosola at their disposal. Brachiano relies on his secretary Flamineo, who sees to everything from the arrangement of his affair with Vittoria to the organisation of the murders of Isabella and Camillo. Francisco obtains Lodovico's pardon from exile, and Lodovico serves him by avenging Isabella's death: Brachiano, Vittoria, and Flamineo die at his hands.

The rulers pay their agents for their services. Flamineo is ready to do anything in return for financial support. Angered by his mother's objections to Vittoria's seduction, he openly explains his motivation in pandering his sister to Brachiano:

> I would fain know where lies the mass of wealth
> Which you have hoarded for my maintenance,
> That I may bear my beard out of the level
> Of my lord'd stirrup. (The White Devil I.ii.309-12)

Bosola also knows very well that to obtain sufficient financial recompense, he must fulfil his masters' demands, however wicked they might be:

> FERDINAND: There's gold.
> BOSOLA: So:
> What follows? (Never rain'd such showers as these
> Without thunderbolts i'th'tail of them;)
> Whose throat must I cut? (The Duchess of Malfi I.ii.170-73)

This viewpoint draws our attention to the third aspect of the pattern of violence (which reveals itself most recognisably in Bosola's career): the only substantial threat to the system of power created by the rulers comes from the agents -- the latter can bring about the rulers' downfall just as well as implementing their wishes. Thus, the rulers fall victim to the strategies they themselves have established.

In The Duchess of Malfi, Bosola grows more and more restless as a result of the increasing cruelty of his masters' demands. On Ferdinand's orders, he is made to torture the Duchess spiritually by showing her the wax figures of Antonio and her children and making her believe that they are dead. For the first time, we see him showing concern for his intended victim:

> BOSOLA: Why do you do this?
>
> FERDINAND: To bring her to despair.
>
> BOSOLA: 'Faith, end here;
>
> And go no farther in your cruelty,
>
> Send her a penitential garment, to put on
>
> Next to her delicate skin, and furnish her
>
> With beads and prayerbooks. (IV.i.114-19)

Following the Duchess's death, with a perverse turn of mind Ferdinand accuses Bosola of murdering her pitilessly. This act of deliberate callousness marks a decisive turning point in Bosola's career:

> Your brother and yourself are worthy men;
>
> You have a pair of hearts are hollow graves,
>
> Rotten, and rotting others:

.....

I stand like one

That long hath tane a sweet and golden dream.

I am angry with myself, now that I wake.

(IV.ii.316-18, 321-23)

Exactly the same reason lies behind Lodovico's decision to retaliate against the rulers in The White Devil. Likewise, Flamineo attempts to murder Vittoria as she has refused to reward him for his services. No sooner does the system the agents have helped to perpetuate begin to turn against them than they seek for ways to employ violence against their one-time masters. The abuse of power always leads to violence, and this affects almost every individual in the play, and hence the society as a whole.

There is a clear difference between the ways in which the rulers are expected to behave and the way in which they actually behave -- particularly when we consider George Holland's views:

> The importance of the personal example of those in political power .... is the basis of most of the classical, medieval, and Renaissance books of advice for princes and is an essential part of the ethics of a communal and hierarchical political structure.[2]

A great irony of the plays is that the rulers perpetuate corruption by manipulating this notion whilst serving their own interests, "comeddling" religion with politics. Neither Cornelia nor the Pilgrims (representatives of the common people) publicly condemn them for violating their "example," the rulers' innate authority keeps them

held in awe by the subjects. Only those who have seen the falsity of this by being in the rulers' pay, or by being involved in the workings of power themselves, can mount a challenge to the rulers. Even Flamineo, who unlike Bosola constantly flatters his master, actually threatens to break Brachiano's neck when Brachiano calls him a "pander" (IV.ii.49). Infuriated at Flamineo's audacity, Brachiano asks: "Do you know me?" (56), to which Flamineo retorts:

> O my lord! methodically.
> As in this world there are degrees of evils:
> So in this world there are degrees of devils. (57-59)

One of the most sarcastic remarks of the play, Flamineo's words suggest that the rulers indulge in the highest degree of evil, which results in their "rotting" all institutions and segments of the society. The ensuing spread of corruption is now inevitable and complete.

Chapter III

Corruption and the Individual

The principle around which Webster's societies revolve being defined as corruption, the individual responses to this system should be analysed in more detail, to ascertain whether its influence can be counteracted. This does not manifest itself as "an agonised search for moral order in the uncertain and chaotic world of Jacobean scepticism," [1] which serves as a basis for Webster's plays according to Irving Ribner. It has more to do with the characters' attempts to overcome the spiritual dismemberment which society inflicts upon them. To achieve this, they have to consider their relationship to the society as precisely as possible, taking into consideration both the personal and social forces which affect them. Such forces are highly likely to conflict with one another; and unless one has sufficient strength to confront such conflicts, one must be destroyed. This strength -- which may be described as an inner strength, as opposed to the external strength (i.e. the outward manifestations of power) discussed in the previous chapter -- becomes the major means by which the characters may attempt to resist the corrupt influence of society.

A. The Defeated Individual

It is important to recognise that in Webster's plays, the majority of the characters are engaged in a perpetual conflict between their social identities and what might be described as their essential natures. A complete identity between the individual's social being and his/her essential nature is impossible. If one

remains satisfied by defining one's identity in terms of the roles assigned by society, one cannot assess the social and personal factors that influence the individual psyche. The immediate consequence of this is a discrepancy between word and deed, or theory and practice, which is likely to result in spiritual dismemberment.

The power bestowed upon the rulers by their social status corrupts them as well as their subjects. This power is abused without any thought of the moral consequences. In The White Devil, Cardinal Monticelso severely condemns Lodovico's intention to avenge Isabella's death, with an apparent moralistic concern appropriate to his office:

> Miserable creature!
> If thou persist in this, it's damnable.
> Dost thou imagine thou canst slide on blood
> And not be tainted with a shameful fall? (IV.iii.116-19)

But Monticelso seems to have forgotten that he has used his position in pursuit of the same intention while excommunicating Brachiano and Vittoria. He abuses the moral values he is expected to uphold on the one hand, and seeks shelter in them on the other. This discrepancy between word and deed proves that he himself has been corrupted by the social status with which he evidently aligns himself.

Isabella also suffers from a contradiction within herself which society has created by categorising her as a faithful wife and a responsible Duchess. This manifests itself openly when she decides to pretend that she, not her husband, has caused their breach. By acting the jealous wife before Francisco and Monticelso, she hopes to fulfil the requirements of her social identity. She has willingly chosen to

operate within the framework of this imposed personality. But the language of violence Isabella employs during this performance is excessive. Clearly it represents the desperate reaction of a woman who has not found a suitable means of self-expression:

ISABELLA: O that I were a man, or that I had power
To execute my apprehended wishes,
I would whip some with scorpions.
FRANSISCO: What? turn'd fury?
ISABELLA: To dig the strumpet's eyes out, let her lie
Some twenty months a-dying, to cut off
Her nose and lips, pull out her rotten teeth,
Preserve her flesh like mummia, for trophies
Of my just anger. Hell to my affliction
Is mere snow-water: (II.i.242-50)

In a sense, Isabella contributes towards her own destruction, for she does not realise that the identity imposed on her by society is the main factor preventing her true self-expresion. Her naive belief in this wifely image prevents her perceiving the extent of Brachiano's corruption, even after he has harshly denied their marriage. Unable to cope with her situation, Isabella sublimates her real wishes by role-playing.

B. The 'Powerful' Individual

In both plays some characters can precisely diagnose the social factors influencing their actions. Flamineo and Bosola are fully conscious of the corruption in society, and deliberately choose to

prosper by perpetuating it. They freely acknowledge that they are parasites nourished by the present social system. "Knaves do grow great by being great men's apes" (The White Devil IV.ii.245) says Flamineo. Angered by the Cardinal's ingratitude for his services, Bosola retorts: "blackbirds fatten best in hard weather: why not I, in these dog-days?" (The Duchess of Malfi I.i.38-39). Enhanced by a detached outlook on life, this self-awareness enables them to view events and people in an objective manner, and not be diverted by every circumstance they encounter.

However, this apparently privileged position is not sufficient to enable them to overcome the problems they face. First and foremost they have to fulfil their obligations towards their masters, and these may occasion immediate conflict with their other social responsibilities. Flamineo's mother insists upon his leading a morally correct and honest life. This is rendered impractical from the very beginning, as he has to arrange for Brachiano's illicit affair with Vittoria. Flamineo has no hesitation in making his choice; he absolves himself of all familial bonds by treating his mother brutally, and murdering his brother. Bosola has no social responsibilities (apart from those to his masters). However, he constantly fuels the conflicts between himself and his masters by blaming them for his corruption, and this foreshadows the major confrontation that takes place in Act V. Flamineo has no problems in implementing his aims readily, whereas Bosola's conscience prevents his doing likewise; he spends a great deal of energy recalling his primary aim:

O, this base quality

Of intelligencer! Why, every quality i'th'world
Prefers but gain, or commendation:
Now for this act, I am certain to be rais'd,
And men that paint weeds, to the life, are prais'd.

(The Duchess of Malfi III.ii.325-29)

Flamineo never allows self-criticism to develop to such an extent, in case it results in a loss of his will-power. The crucial event in his career occurs when he sees Cornelia distractedly mourning for Marcello, and he represses the pangs of conscience by reaffirming his primary purpose:

I have a strange thing in me, to the which
I cannot give a name, without it be
Compassion; I pray leave me.
[Exit FRANCISCO]
This night I'll know the utmost of my fate,
I'll be resolv'd what my rich sister means
T'assign me for my service. (The White Devil V.v.112-17)

Nevertheless, he cannot avoid this new and "strange" conflict that easily:

I have liv'd
Riotously ill, like some some that live in court.
And sometimes, when my face was full of smiles
Have felt the maze of conscience in my breast. (117-20)

And still worse, Flamineo's imagination invokes the ghost of Brachiano throwing earth at him, in such a way that foreshadows his inevitable doom. Yet Flamineo overcomes this crisis by sheer effort of will (142-

48), and this enables him to make his final manipulative move against Vittoria, which leads to the deaths of both at the hands of their professed enemies (V.vi). Flamineo has been "a conscious artificer of his own role" [2] in life, to quote Arthur C. Kirsch. He has no intention of letting anyone manipulate or patronise him even in death. He preserves his singleness of purpose throughout:

> GASPARO: Recommend yourself to heaven.
>
> FLAMINEO: No I will carry mine own commendations thither. (V.vi.193-95)

Flamineo has seen for himself that whatever moral or religious values others set before themselves as examples to live by or talk by (like Gasparo), these have no bearing upon the actual world into which he was born. Why, then, (as his retort implies) should such values have any significance in the world after death? Or, to go one step further, why should the world after death -- termed by some as "heaven" -- exist? Flamineo interprets death as a form of non-existence, in which anyone may feel lost: "O, I am in a mist" (258). He knows full well that all his actions were inspired by a willing acceptance of the role imposed on him by a corrupt society. Therefore, "I do not look / Who went before, nor who shall follow me; / No at myself I will begin and end " (254-56).

The circumstances which contribute to Bosola's death and the conclusions to be drawn from it are somewhat different. His confrontation with the Duchess finally provokes in him a feeling of disgust towards his masters, and a reluctance to indulge in overt action. After playing his spectacular part in the Duchess's death (as

will be discussed below), Bosola begins to be aware of the impositions of his "guilty conscience" (The Duchess of Malfi IV.ii.354) which bring tears that "Never grew / In my mother's milk" (360-61). Those impulses which now determine Bosola's actions will have momentous consequences for the play as well as his own being. As Kirsch puts it;

> Bosola, like Flamineo, is a satirical commentator who has a commanding effect upon the kinds of reactions we have to all characters and actions he directs or overlooks. When, therefore, he loses part of his sardonic detachment and becomes more deeply implicated in the action, the insistent satiric perspective of the play is ameliorated and even converted to something resembling compassionate insight.[3]

During the ensuing intrigues of murder, Bosola kills Antonio by accident. With a reinforced desire for revenge after this fatal "mistake as I have often seen / In a play," (V.v.95-96) he wounds the Cardinal and Ferdinand and receives his own death-wound as well. As he lies dying, Bosola explains the causes that brought about this bloodshed:

> Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi, murdered
> By th'Aragonian brethren; for Antonio
> Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
> Poison'd by this man; and lastly, for myself,
> That was an actor in the main of all,
> Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th'end
> Neglected. (81-87)

Unlike Flamineo, Bosola cannot accept the role he has been forced to

play in society; he knows that he has only remained the servant of more powerful bodies. This realisation accounts for Flamineo and Bosola's different attitudes to life and death. Bosola acknowledges the existence of a cosmos above and beyond his little Italianate world:

> DUCHESS: I could curse the stars.
>
> BOSOLA: O fearful!
>
> DUCHESS: And those three smiling seasons of the year
>
> Into a Russian winter: nay the world
>
> To its first chaos.
>
> BOSOLA: Look you, the stars shine still. (IV.i.95-99)

Nonetheless, as he has existed and operated within the microcosm of life, so he is sure to exist and operate beyond it after death. Flamineo has refuted the notion of an afterworld, whereas Bosola verifies it for himself. As his last words suggest; "Mine is another voyage" (V.v.105).

C. The Dominant Woman

The discourse of Bosola bears a striking resemblance to the Duchess's dialogue from Act IV onwards, so much so that as Kirsch points out; "The nominal focus in Act V is on Bosola, but Bosola's feelings and actions now serve to dramatize the transforming power of the Duchess and the significance of her suffering and endurance."[4] Indeed, he describes the Duchess's appearance during the various stages of her ordeal. Both Bosola and the Duchess conceive of the world as a stage, where the parts they play have turned out to be

diametrically opposed to their nature and intentions. The first to employ this kind of imagery is the Duchess : "I account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part in't against my will" (IV.i.84-85). The suffering figure of the Duchess leaves unerasable traces in Bosola's imagination, which is evidenced by the two theatrical images he uses in her wake, as already quoted (V.v.84-87, 95-96).

Although deeply affected by the Duchess's suffering, Bosola does not simply draw lessons for himself by her example. In IV.ii, where Bosola finally admits that he is her "common bellman," (172) it is clear that they enjoy a give-and-take relationship enabling them to deal with questions relating to the meaning of man's existence on earth. The tempestuousness of the preceding scene created by Ferdinand's horrific inventions such as the dead man's hand and the wax-figures has passed. The Duchess has reached a stage where she can endure and overcome the tortures inflicted upon her:

> I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow.
> Th'heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass,
> The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad.
> I am acquainted with sad misery,
> As the tann'd galley slave is with his oar.
> Necessity makes me suffer constantly,
> And custom makes it easy. (24-30)

Her suicidal intentions have been replaced by the realisation that she has not long to live, after all: "The robin-breast and the nightingale / Never live long in cages" (13-14).

Although Bosola does not overhear the Duchess's words at this point, he demonstrates his understanding of the miserable condition of mankind on earth by using the same imagery when answering the Duchess's question "Who am I?" (123). The short time-lag between these two speeches enhances the feeling on the part of the spectator that the Duchess and Bosola have started to think alike:

> BOSOLA: Thou art a box of worm seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy: what's this flesh? a little crudded milk, fantastical puff-paste: our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in: more contemptible; since ours is to preserve earth-worms: didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison.
>
> DUCHESS: Am I not your Duchess? (124-33)

This half-rhetorical, half-wondering question indicates that the Duchess is now taking note of Bosola's words instead of blindly refuting them. She is no longer "participating in chaos while cursing it." [5] She has now become a figure "asserting itself against the engulfing chaos, failing to struggle free, indeed on the contrary deriving ... great force and power from the violence of the background (Ferdinand, Bosola, the madmen, etc.)." [6] Bosola should evidently be given the highest credit for this, not because of the violence he inflicts upon the Duchess, but because of his involvement in her suffering.

The Duchess's calm and noble response to the violence of her death is as would be expected. It seems however that Bosola has not yet completely understood the spiritual immunity which her ordeals have given her; he is puzzled by the Duchess's indifference to the violence of her death. Clearly, this is the final lesson he is to learn from his victim:

BOSOLA: Yet, methinks,
The manner of your death should much afflict you,
This cord should terrify you?
DUCHESS: Not a whit,
What would it pleasure me, to have my throat cut
With diamonds? or to be smothered
With cassia? or to be shot to death, with pearls?
I know death hath ten thousand several doors
For men to take their exits; (213-20)

The image of the Duchess making her entrance to the gates of heaven (232) on her knees affects the audience as well as Bosola. His confrontation with her has given him a belief by which he can judge himself, and thus endow his life with meaning. Therefore, "It may be pain: but no harm to me to die / In so good a quarrel" (V.v.99-100). By means of this agonising yet powerful relationship which has been initiated by external forces (i.e. Ferdinand and the Cardinal) yet moulded into something indestructible by their personalities, Bosola and the Duchess manage to reach beyond the terrifying void Flamineo faces at his death. Yet Flamineo's achievement is no less considerable by the fact that he acted alone in all his enterprises. Flamineo is

condemned by Irving Ribner as being "a Bosola incapable of growth." [7] But when we take into account the variations in the responses of Bosola and Flamineo to the similar social mechanisms in which they operate, we see how oversimplified this observation is. What the three characters have in common is the urge to define themselves in their own terms, which equips them with the power to resist, if not overcome, spiritual dismemberment.

In this context, Vittoria's case is the most problematic one. The sententiousness of her last words ("O happy they that never saw the court, / Nor ever knew great man but by report" (The White Devil V.vi.259-60)) seems rather incongruous when compared with the defiant, energetic discourse which has previously been the most salient aspect of her character. The fact that Webster gives Flamineo the privilege of expressing Vittoria's feelings renders the situation all the more difficult to comprehend. As a final evaluation on her behaviour throughout her life, Flamineo's comment is much more penetrating than anything Vittoria says at her last moments:

> Th'rt a noble sister,
> I love thee now; if woman do breed man
> She ought to teach him manhood. Fare thee well.
> Know many glorious women that are fam'd
> For masculine virtue, have been vicious,
> Only a happier silence did betide them.
> She hath no faults, who hath the art to hide them. (239-45)

Moreover, it is the most objective evaluation of her personality when the extreme responses she has evoked from other men are recalled.

Vittoria has so far been quick to respond to any comment about herself; thus it seems strange that she does not take notice of Flamineo's words. Instead, she describes the void that has opened up before her: "My soul, like to a ship in a black storm, / Is driven I know not whither," (246-47) and in a sense admits that nothing but spiritual dismemberment should await a "vicious" woman. She is condemned in the eyes of the audience. Nevertheless, her stature in life renders this superficial process of condemnation rather unimportant. Her silent acceptance of Flamineo's comment can well be attributed to a weariness of men's unchanging attitude towards her, which she has earlier expressed with eloquence: "Terrify babes, my lord, with painted devils, / I am past such needless palsy" (III.ii.146-47). This is the most genuine response Vittoria gives to her world, and to the audience.

We need to analyse Vittoria and the Duchess in closer detail, as their vicissitudes are directly related to a pivotal concern of both The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi; one that deals with the conflict which arises from the domination men try hard to establish over women, and women's refusal to be subdued. As this conflict is intricately interwoven with other conflicts relating to the struggle for power, it may not attract due attention at first. Webster introduces these two women among the major characters of the plays as part of his intention to explore the ways in which a woman may choose to express herself within the given social order and the consequences of this commitment. This issue will be dealt with in the following chapter.

Chapter IV

Power and Gender

It is the general custom of men in both The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi to conceive of women as either angels or (more frequently) devils. At one extreme, this attitude brings about the deification of women as paragons of virtue. At the other, it results in their damnation as initiators of chaos. Yet both conceptions serve the same end of fitting women into well-defined roles so that they may be overpowered the more easily. This points out a fear in men of the potential in women to disrupt the patriarchal order of society, which women can initiate by choosing to act on their personal initiative rather than accepting the submissive roles assigned to them. In refusing to act the faithful wife and contracting an illicit alliance with Brachiano, Vittoria becomes an enemy of society. The Duchess threatens the patriarchal order even more seriously, for she not only casts aside the role of the chaste widow by remarrying, but also chooses a man of lower social status as a husband. As the Duchess's and Vittoria's decisions are perceived as unforgivable transgressions in the eyes of their male enemies, they are violently punished in the end.

A. Women as Perceived by Men

Anita Loomba observes that "women who are the targets of violence in Jacobean drama threaten the class and race limits of patriarchal societies through their wayward sexuality." [1] We shall discuss the reasons why women are regarded as threats later; let us consider first

the implications of the strategies by which men seek to keep women, -- or to put it more precisely, female sexuality -- under control. One such strategy is the attempt to depersonalise women by investing them with angelic qualities:

> but in that look
> There speaketh so divine a continence,
> As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope.
> Her days are practis'd in such noble virtue,
> That, sure her nights, nay more, her very sleeps,
> Are more in heaven, than other ladies' shrifts.
>
> (The Duchess of Malfi I.ii.123-28)

This is the first description of the Duchess in the play, drawn by her servant (later her husband) Antonio. Behind the extravagance of this praise, there lies a wilful self-delusion. Antonio cannot rid himself of this image which he has created until the Duchess successfully punctures it:

> Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh
> To fear, more than to love me. Sir, be confident,
> What's it distracts you? This is flesh, and blood, sir,
> 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
> Kneels at my husband's tomb. (370-74)

On other occasions, an alternative strategy can be employed -- associating female sexuality with a devilish nature:

> Your beauty! O ten thousand curses on't.
> How long have I beheld the devil in crystal?
>
> (The White Devil IV.ii.87-88)

Thus Brachiano insults Vittoria upon reading Francisco's feigned love letter to her. Although Vittoria ignores her own responsibilities which have contrived to place her in her present situation, Brachiano deserves the following reproach:

> What have I gain'd by thee but infamy?
> Thou hast stain'd the spotless honour of my house,
> And frighted thence noble society:
> .....
> What do you call this house?
> Is this your palace? Did not the judge style it
> A house of penitent whores? Who sent me to it?
> Who hath the honour to advance Vittoria
> To this incontinent college? Is't not you? (107-9, 113-17)

Both plays abound in similar images of Vittoria and the Duchess, which emphasise their devilish nature (as the first strategy exemplified by Antonio's praise is rarely applied). Bosola and Flamineo repeatedly resort to this strategy (The White Devil I.ii.115-19, 197-200, IV.ii.82-83; The Duchess of Malfi II.i.24-48, II.ii.11-27): it is clear that the grudge they bear against women in general stems from an obsession with female sexuality. In this respect, the responses of Vittoria and the Duchess, although infrequent, call for great attention as they may provide us with the opportunity to judge the validity of male opinions. Even this may not be sufficient: we have seen how Flamineo (instead of Vittoria herself) is given the privilege of shaping the audience's final reactions to Vittoria. Furthermore, Bosola's dominant position in the Duchess's quest

suggests that his function in this play is not unlike Flamineo's. When Ferdinand asks him how the Duchess responds to her imprisonment, Bosola answers:

> Nobly: I'll describe her.
> She's sad, as one long us'd to't: and she seems
> Rather to welcome the end of misery
> Than shun it: a behaviour so noble,
> As gives a majesty to adversity:
> You may discern the shape of loveliness
> More perfect in her tears, than in her smiles;
> She will muse for hours together: and her silence,
> Methinks, expresseth more than if she spake.
>
> (The Duchess of Malfi IV.i.2-10)

Like Flamineo's final praise of Vittoria, this comment shapes the responses of the audience to the Duchess. Caution must be observed when evaluating Webster's female characters, as Lisa Jardine explains:

> The female hero moves in an exclusively masculine stage world in which it is the task of the male characters to 'read' her.... So when the critic tells us that the Jacobean dramatist shows peculiar insight into female character, and even into female psychology, we should pause for a moment. What he or she means is that a convincing portrayal of female psychology is given from a distinctively male viewpoint (even if this is not actually made explicit by the critic).[2]

However, this is not the only drawback in evaluating Webster's

female protagonists: it is clear that the dramatist has imposed certain constraints upon their vicissitudes through a specific structural pattern. No matter to what extent these women exercise their free will, they have to conform to this pattern which, according to Anita Loomba, is characteristic of Jacobean tragedy:

> Women in Jacobean tragedy are not simply killed, but tortured - often elaborately over a period of time - by a combination of familial, judicial and religious authorities. Many end up by begging for death as merciful release: 'Yes', says Vittoria, 'I shall welcome death / As Princes do some great Ambassadors' (The White Devil, V.vi.217-18); The Duchess of Malfi knows that 'It is some mercy, when men kill with speed' (IV.i.109)....[3]

The final part of the pattern, if taken at face-value, implies that these women have been defeated, and thus could serve to undermine Webster's radical intentions: a moral judgement appears to have been passed upon their aspirations. Webster could not have made them ultimately victorious, in the light of seventeenth-century opinions as regards the male censorship of women. Before turning to the female reactions to the patriarchal society and their importance, we should analyse the ideological premises which influenced the structure of Webster's tragedies.

B. Women and the Struggle for Power

Lisa Jardine's book Still Harping on Daughters provides a detailed summary of the Land Law and the regulations governing

inheritence of property in sixteenth-century England as well as Europe, in order to prove that women had gained certain legal privileges. But women could not make use of these privileges owing to the pressures of a patriarchal society. Jardine illustrates this point by referring to several plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, and to The Duchess of Malfi in particular. The Duchess is a "royal heir, dowager of the Dukedom of Amalfi, carrier of a substantial dowry in goods,"[4] -- an awareness of which provokes her brothers' opposition to marriage. The "lusty widow" (I.ii.263) should "be not cunning: / For they whose faces do belie their hearts / Are witches, ere they arrive at twenty years, / Ay: and give the devil suck" (232-35). Despite their moralistic excuses and their obsession with her sexuality, Ferdinand and the Cardinal's violent treatment of the Duchess is chiefly prompted by ideological purposes. By monopolosing the Duchess's privileges, the Aragonian brothers aim at increasing their political influence.

Following Brachiano's murder in Act V of The White Devil, Vittoria's death becomes imperative, as Jardine explains: "On the death of her husband a widow normally retained one third of his estate for her use during her lifetime - her dower."[5] This would endanger the re-establishment of the alliance which Giovanni, the sole heir to the Dukedom of Brachiano, could accomplish. Hence, Francisco has Vittoria murdered.

With the deaths of Vittoria and the Duchess, the patriarchal pattern which was characteristic of Jacobean drama has been reinforced. Yet Webster provides a subtle twist to this pattern: it is

clear that both Vittoria and the Duchess can only be dispensed with through violent means. They offer a radical alternative to the patriarchal order, and as such need to be destroyed. Ironically enough, strong and resourceful as they are, these women contribute towards their own destruction after some point, as they are sooner or later bound to make mistakes in their attempts to resist the numerous obstacles the patriarchal society puts in front of them.

C. Recapitulation: Vittoria and the Duchess

The most salient quality that discriminates Vittoria from all the other characters of The White Devil is the ambiguity of her motivations. She has a curious way of 'not acting'; she usually induces action from others rather than indulging in it directly, which makes the task of assessing her character extremely difficult. A seemingly simple nightmare story is enough to persuade Brachiano to implement the deaths of Isabella and Camillo (I.ii.239-53). It may be that she aims to gratify her sexual desires with Brachiano which her foolish husband has not beeen able to fulfil. She may also have material interests in mind like her brother Flamineo. By means of her reproach to Brachiano, she not only makes him beg forgiveness but also paves the way for the final step of marriage, enhancing the feeling on the part of the audience that she may have had hopes of becoming a Duchess from the very beginning by means of her affair with Brachiano. However, there is no evidence in the play to provide us with a clue to her real motivations. As she puts it in the arraignment;

Sum up my faults I pray, and you shall find,

That beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart,

And a good stomach to a feast, are all,

All the poor crimes you can charge me with: (III.ii.206-9)

Taking advantage of the insufficient evidence against her, Vittoria resourcefully manages to put right on her side. As M.C. Bradbrook explains;

> There is a subordinate side of Vittoria which is innocent. (The real jury at Vittoria's trial is not the Ambassadors, but the audience - they know much more about the main charge of adultery and the minor charge, in an ecclesiastical court, of complicity in murder.) The guilty side is naturally predominant; but if the various hints of the other are examined together, their cumulative weight will be found considerable .... Vittoria lies steadily but, as has been said, with no overtone of deceit, so that she hardly seems morally guilty; her 'innocent-resembling boldness' as Lamb called it, is thoroughly convincing. [6]

Clearly Vittoria can manipulate such precarious situations to her own benefit. But she makes the fatal mistake of involving herself in explicit confrontation, as exemplified in her life-and-death struggle that takes place with Flamineo (V.vi). On seeing that Flamineo seriously intends to kill her, Vittoria tries to pacify him by means of lies such as "What do you want? What would you have me do? / Is not all mine, yours?" (28-29). Too experienced to be gulled, Flamineo foils her subsequent plot to kill him. Vittoria lacks his ability to construct perfect plots which require direct involvement.

The Duchess also resorts to devious stratagems in an attempt to outwit her male rivals; but with a difference. Unlike Vittoria, she has to "leave the path / Of simple virtue, which was never made / To seem the thing it is not" (I.ii.365-67) -- something which evidently troubles her. This dilemma prevents the Duchess from carrying out her role as a schemer as successfully. On the one hand, the Duchess is resolved to undertake any action her aim necessitates: "If all my royal kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage: / I'ld make them by low foot-steps" (I.ii.213-15). On the other, she can be so optimistic as to hope that "All discord, without this circumference, / Is only to be pitied, and not fear'd" (386-87). The greatest mistake the Duchess makes is to undermine her brothers' warnings by believing that marriage, being "a sacrament o'th'Church," (IV.ii.38) will finally persuade her brothers to show mercy when they learn about it; she thinks that she will not be compelled to act contrary to her convictions. Her optimism is also shown to be naive when she confides in Bosola (III.ii), whom she very well knows is working for her brothers.

Obviously, her confidence in her social position contributes towards her belief that she will be immune from punishment. Only by Bosola's indifference towards her status in IV.ii does she realise her self-delusion, which she has unwittingly entertained since her banishment. From then on, the Duchess searches for self-identity by means of other alternatives. But her brothers have deprived her of almost every privilege which hitherto defined her identity: she is neither a duchess, a wife nor a mother. Hence her sole alternative

becomes the stoical acceptance of death:

> Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength
> Must pull down heaven upon me:
> Yet stay, heaven gates are not so highly arch'd
> As princes' palaces: they that enter there
> Must go upon their knees. (230-34)

From a moral point of view, the Duchess has achieved an "Integrity of life" (V.v.120) in spite of the corruption which surrounds her. Her suffering is one of "an instinctive creature awakened by suffering to maturity."[7] She is given a chance to overcome the spiritual barrenness Vittoria faces at her death (The White Devil VI.vi.246-47). Bradbrook's observation suggests that the motivations of these women determine the reactions they will get from the audience throughout the play: the Duchess's vicissitudes are apparently viewed more sympathetically than those of Vittoria.

However, the Duchess's final response to death cannot be regarded as a success when the patriarchal pattern is taken into consideration. Throughout the play, we have seen that the Duchess represents a potentially subversive threat to society; she rejects the role of the chaste widow her brothers attempt to impose on her. Now we are asked to believe that she should die as a pathetic heroine -- a victim rather than an active threat to society. Webster's radicalism has apparently been tempered, as he shows that she is capable of attaining wisdom through suffering. In fact, she "is reduced to the safe composite stereotype of penitent whore, Virgin majestic in grief, serving mother, and patient and true turtle-dove mourning her one love."[8]

Although the audience may sympathise with the Duchess's sufferings, and condemn Vittoria despite her headstrong character, the patriarchal pattern finally reduces both to the same situation. The Duchess believes in her social privileges; her mistake is to underestimate the influence of her male-dominated society, which takes her status, her family and her life away from her. Vittoria's mistake is to abandon her own methods of self-advancement and instead attempt to play the game of power-politics (which has hitherto been played by the dominant male members of her society) -- as with the Duchess, this results in her destruction. Yet the dramatist is obviously not content with the limitations of this; the overall impression his female protagonists give is too elusive to admit any clear-cut judgement. In the world of the plays, "Woman to man / Is either a god or a wolf" (The White Devil IV.ii.91-22). The male characters could not and would not try to reconcile these two extremes, as this would threaten the status quo -- it would stimulate change. By refusing to be defined in these terms, Webster's female protagonists represent a potentially subversive alternative to the patriarchal society. Webster subtly emphasises this alternative in both plays, and leaves the audience free to draw their own inferences from it.

Chapter V

Conclusion

In the preface to The White Devil, Webster admits that although he has chosen tragedy as his literary medium, he does not faithfully observe the requirements of this genre:

> If it be objected that this is no true dramatic poem, I shall easily confess it, - non potes in nugas dicera plura meas; ipse ego quam dixi [you cannot say more against my trifles than I have said myself], - willingly, and not ignorantly, in this kind have I faulted;....[1]

Webster attributes his faults to the lack of a sophisticated audience, but he does not mention precisely which aspects of a tragedy he has chosen to ignore, nor does he dwell on the possible reasons which have led him to question the definition of the genre. The solution to these questions can be found by recalling his primary purpose in writing The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil.

Our analysis has shown that no character in these plays attains the status of a tragic character, as defined by Aristotle: "Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things man chooses or avoids."[2] For one thing, Webster's characters find themselves entangled in the web of corruption irrespective of whether they choose to act morally or not. They are not only the victims but also the instigators of their corrupt world, in which morality has ceased to exist. Still worse, under the obligation to act as urgently as possible, none of them ever attains sufficient self-knowledge to be able to see the workings of corruption from a wider perspective. The modern critic Richard B.Sewall observes that any choice the tragic

character makes must lead to suffering, "as the protagonist acts in the knowledge that what he feels he must do is in some sense wrong."[3] It is true that the Duchess suffers, but this is not the outcome of a genuine internal conflict as Sewall suggests -- she never stops to think twice about her decisions. Thus she does not achieve the kind of tragic recognition which is common to classical tragedies. It is also clear that her suffering is brought about by external forces -- Ferdinand and the Cardinal. None of the actions the characters undertake in both plays suggests any large-scale change for the better within the given social system, so as to relieve the audience of the burden of facing social corruption as reflected in the texts. Webster is too realistic to provide his audience with an experience of "catharsis," which according to Aristotle should be the customary outcome of the feelings of "pity and fear" aroused by the tragic characters' suffering.

It is obvious that Webster has deliberately modified the elements of classical tragedy, and hence redefined this genre for himself. In analysing the corrupting influence of power as exercised by the rulers, Webster also shows the potentially subversive alternatives to this social system, which the individual may initiate by means of various strategies. We have seen that the women use indirect rather than direct strategies for self-advancement, and these strategies become the most threatening alternatives to the patriarchal society simply because of the fact that they are alien to the male modes of action. But the women have to be destroyed as well as their male counterparts, which is an essential part of the dramatist's thematic

design. Webster wants to explore the destructive effects of the power-politics as may be applied by the rulers of any contemporary society; to do this, he assumes a radical perspective which rejects conventional notions of morality, class and gender. There is no doubt that he has incorporated this into his plays - so much so that he has in a sense, created a different kind of tragedy; and this is sufficient evidence to prove that he has successfully achieved his original intention in writing these tragedies.

Notes

I. Introduction

1 T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1951) 117.

2 T.B. Tomlinson, A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964) 133.

3 Irving Ribner, "Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order" The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi: A Casebook, ed. R.V Holdsworth (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975) 129.

4 David Farley-Hills, Jacobean Drama: A Critical Study of the Professional Drama, 1600-25 (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988) 135.

5 Farley-Hills, Jacobean Drama 136.

6 All references to the texts of The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi from John Webster: Three Plays, ed. D.C. Gunby (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983).

7 J.W. Lever, The Jacobean Tragedy of State, new edn. (London: Methuen and Co Ltd., 1987) 83-84.

8 Lever, Tragedy of State 95.

9 Lever, Tragedy of State 95.

10 Lever, Tragedy of State 94.

11 George Holland, "The Minor Characters in The White Devil," Philological Quarterly 52.1 (January 1973): 53.

12 Holland, "The Minor Characters" 53.

13 Jonathan Dollimore, Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1984) 240.

II. Power and Society

1 Dollimore, Radical Tragedy 232.

2 Holland, "The Minor Characters" 52.

III. Corruption and the Individual

1 Ribner, Quest for Moral Order 118.

2 Arthur C. Kirsch, Jacobean Dramatic Perspectives (Charlottsville: University of Virginia Press, 1972) 100.

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4 Kirsch, Dramatic Perspectives 109.

5 Tomlinson, A Study 147.

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IV. Power and Gender

1 Anita Loomba, Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) 83.

2 Lisa Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1983) 69.

3 Loomba, Gender 80.

4 Jardine, Still Harping 90.

5 Jardine, Still Harping 80.

6 M.C. Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 180-81.

7 Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions 202.

8 Jardine, Still Harping 91.

V. Conclusion

1 John Webster, "The White Devil: To the Reader," John Webster: Three Plays, ed. D.C. Gunby (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983) ll's 14-17.

2 Aristotle, "Poetics," trans. S.H. Butcher, The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism, eds. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3rd edn. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967) 35.

3 Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy, new edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 47.

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